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ABSTRACT

The Kankakee, Illinois, school district investigated the causes of social conflict in the school district and developed a system of tension monitoring and reduction. Causes of tensions identified by the school district come under the headings institutional, instructional, and personal-interaction. The school's program for tension reduction, once critical levels of tension have been reached, is to introduce activities to create positive excitement that counter and reduce the tension. Some of the activities described in the report include class projects and field trips, discussions with parents and student leaders, clean-up campaigns, cultural assemblies, and school dances. The relative effectiveness of these different activities is discussed. (JF)

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A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO TENSION MONITORING AND TENSION REDUCTION IN AN EDUCATIONAL SETTING

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Introduction

During the past four or five years, elementary and senior high schools across the country have been caught in the grips of turmoil. On many different occassions as reported in the communication media, students have been physically assulted, chased home, suspended, expelled and at times have been almost killed. Parents have demanded the firing of teachers and administrators for either being too strict or too permissive in resolving these student confrontations. The police have been brought into some schools not only to stop riots, but to remain in the halls on a permanent basis. As a result, the police too have been criticized for their conduct in an effort to restore peace. Some school districts, because of these problems, have developed reputations that extend beyond the school gates. Unscrupulous realators whose towns compete economically with nearby communities have capitalized on these school conflicts by advertising that persons should locate in their town and avoid school problems. Teachers, too, have refused positions in so called "problem school districts" because of a fear, real or imagined, of their personal safety and well being. In addition, many capable persons have refused to enter principalships due to the problems involved with trying to resolve the various student-student, teacher-teacher, teacher-student, and parent-administration encounters inherent in an educational setting. Many parents who can afford the extra financial burden, have taken their children out of the public educational environment and have sent them either

EA 005 276

to parochial or private schools.

Year in and year out, these kinds of problems continue in the country with no apparent end in sight. Many persons whose responsibility it is to solve these problems, however, look to solutions that have either failed or continue to perpetuate the existence of these difficulties. Many of them have been heard to say, "A good snow would solve our problems today," "Man I am glad we have a four day weekend for the students and parents to cool off," "If we got rid of a few trouble makers this school would be better off," or "I could clear this mess up, if I had central office backing." Thus, instead of rising to meet the challenge of school conflicts administrators have sought the easy road out, by utilizing the "band-aid" approach or ignors the problem with the hope that it will disappear.

The Etiology of School Conflicts

The Elliot Report. The Board of Education of the Kankakee School District, on May 13, 1971, asked the Community Service Director, John Elliot, to investigate the causes of social conflict that the school district had recently experienced. He met with students from the two high schools the first day; thereafter, mixed racial groups of ten students met with him first, and these students then chose members who formed the next groups that followed. A total of eighty-four students participated with four parents as consultants. In addition, the teachers from the two high schools also met and drew recommendations concerning causes of conflicts in the high schools.

The following results were collapsed into three areas for clarity: institutional, instructional and personal-interaction. This report is based primarily on the views of students and staff as they perceived the problems.

Institutional Causes

(a) Students felt that they were too confined to the buildings

(b) Students felt that not enough recreational space existed at school

(c) Students felt that they were not involved enough in revising the Code of Conduct.

(d) Improved orientation sessions for new students needed

Instructional Causes

(a) Teachers are not involved enough in teaching human relations in the various classes.

(b) Students do not have the opportunity to select their teachers when personality conflicts exist.

(c) Students do not receive enough exposure to the contribution of minority groups.

(d) There is need for more minority education.

(e) The needs of "slow learners" should be reflected to a greater extent in the curriculum.

(f) The content and requirement of courses are not articulated.

(g) Many students are not aware of the total credits they have earned toward graduation.

(h) There is need for more frequent class supervision by the administration.

(i) The library is not available enough for students seeking its service.

(j) The guidance department does not spend enough time in working directly with students.

(k) Students should participate in the evaluation process of non-tenure teachers.

Personal Interaction Causes

(a) There is not enough communication between students-students, teacher-teacher-student and teacher-student-administration.

(b) Teachers "hassel" students too much.

(c) Not enough student involvement in school sponsored activities.

(d) Non-certificated staff does not know how to relate to students.

(e) Some teachers are not always fair in dealing with students.

(f) The teachers do not always know how to react in a "crisis" situation.

The Parents Report

During the month of November 1972, the author systematically interviewed seventy-five racially mixed parents, with a structured interview, who had students in the two high schools to get their perceptions of the reasons or problems involved in school conflicts. The author felt that this was important so as to present a more complete study by utilizing all three components, the students, the staff, and the parents.

The "parents report" focused primarily on these ideas: school rules, the staff and the general operation of the school.

School Rules

(a) That some students are able to break rules without punishment.

(b) At times, discipline is too severe.

(c) That they are not informed about their children until it is too late to help.

(d) That they are not involved in the development of school rules.

The Staff

(a) That some teachers cannot communicate with some students.

(b) Not enough time is spent with students in a non-educational environment.

(c) That "pointing" (addressing) students out in front of peers create hostility problems.

General Operations of the School

(a) Many students only know one way to react to frustration.

(b) There is a need to have more compassionate persons operating schools.

(c) Students from different racial groups should have an opportunity to meet outside the school setting.

(d) That parents need to be involved in a structured way to aid parent communications.

(e) That parents should not always believe rumors reported in the press or by persons.

(f) That community information should, somehow, find direct channels to the schools.

(g) That parents must be positive in talking about the school to their children.

These two reports were designed to elicit the feelings of persons concerned about school conflicts. They have attempted to relate the etiology of school conflicts as reviewed by the eyes, hearts, and minds of those individuals who participated in the process.

The author knows that in a desegregated school environment it takes time to make the necessary organizational and operational shifts necessary to accommodate the new pluralism that were mentioned earlier in this report. Moreover, it takes money, and a great amount of it to provide the space, to provide the extra personnel, to provide the extra curriculum materials, to provide the additional resources needed to obtain a peaceful environment conducive to educational growth. In addition to desegregated schools, other items also compete for funds, i.e., increases in salaries, shorter work days, smaller class sizes all of which delay achieving a harmonious educational atmosphere.

Therefore, the author contends that school administrators cannot and must not sit idly by and say, "we have problems, and riots are just one of many, there is nothing we can do because we have no funds." The purpose of this article is to provide an alternative to the "ostrich approach" to school administration.

The Tension Theory

The tension theory does not rule out the fact that before lasting peace arrives

in a school setting, that the etiology of school conflicts must be eradicated. However, we as educators must not be nieve to the point of saying until we can remove the underlying causes we will not do anything to solve the problem now. This reminds the author of a person who sees another individual bleeding to death and instead of trying to stop the blood, he looks for a hospital, so as to determine the cause of the problem; or another example would be to see a person starving to death and say to him, "The only way I can help you now, is to get you on welfare," or "You will have to wait until I can try to find you a job." The patients in the meantime, however, die from hunger.

Tension Monitoring

Often it appears that once an administrator has large groups of students fighting, his only course of action is to get sufficient police assistance to regain control. This is the way it has been done in most of the schools for the past four or five years, but requesting police intervention is not the total answer. The more fundamental strategy is to know that problems are developing and mounting long before someting erupts into bloodshed. The covert (hidden) signs of a coming tension riot are very visible before anything overt (observable) develops. What is needed is a trained observer to serve as a pulse taker of the student body.

During the past 1972-1973 school year, the Kankakee School System instituted a systematic approach to deal with serious student conflicts. The program was called PROJECT GRIT (Graduated Reduction in Tension) The objective of the project is to first monitor the tension before anything is done about reducing it. Experience has shown that when the tension is high, black-white fights, name calling, or any other form of racial conflicts can trigger a riot. But in order for this to happen, it is believed that the tension of the school must be above normal safety levels. However, if the tension is low, it takes a great deal of problems, either manufactured by students who want to see a riot, or problems that develop in the natural course of operating a school to incite

distrubances.

The first step in tension monitoring, then, is to prepare a chart. The chart should be prepared on 8½" x 14" legal typing paper, so that there will be enough space for listing the various components which contribute to tension conflicts. The categories in the different schools will vary due to community influence, staff involvement, and student participation, etc. If a school has gone through these conflicts in the past, the authorities should have no difficulty listing the various elements observed to be "movers of tension" for their particular building. If a school is experiencing conflicts for the first time, the building administration may want to first use the components listed in PROJECT GRIT which came from years of experience in conflict resolution, and later change them to coincide with his particular school.

The PROJECT GRIT CHART IS LISTED AS FOLLOWS:

PROJECT GRIT

Name of School_____

Monitor_____

Week of_____

Total School Tension Index Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

CLASS BOREDOM	FIGHTS	SUSPENSIONS	RUMORS	TARDINESS	TEACHER_STUDENT CONFLICTS	CAFETERIA APPEARANCE	HALL BEHAVIOR	COMMUNITY INCIDENTS

Once the chart has been developed, the principal must assign the responsibility for monitoring the tension to a staff member. A Dean of Students, a coach, or a counselor, for example, may be the appropriate staff member to monitor the tension in the school. The point is, the monitor should be a person whose judgement the principal respects and at the same time is in a position that avoids favoritism. It has been reported by school officials in past years, that persons

have made recommendations to the building administration with strings attached for personal gain. That is to say, "I will help you, and if a promotion develops I want to get it." Moreover, principals have relied on the advice of persons whose contact with students was very limited and consequently the decisions made on such advice have sometimes been erroneous. Therefore, the monitor should be a person whose contact with students is broad and at the same time is willing to work unselfishly in this capactiy for the benefit of the total school.

The next step is to begin to monitor the various components listed on the chart. There are two points which should be kept in mind as the monitor begins his assignment. One is to record the observations as accurately and concisely as possible and the other is to record the total number of single behaviors or acts in each category for future interpretations. This chart should be used at least three times a week for data collection purpose, preferably Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. As the monitor goes through the process of systematically examining the various elements of tension, over a period of weeks base line data will emerge in which inferences can be made to objectify safe and unsafe levels of tension.

On Fridays, after all the data has been recorded, the monitor should also record the total number of incidents in each column which will assist in interpretating the meaning of the data.

Tension Interpretation

The next step in this process is to determine the total tension index for the week. This can be done either intuitively or also objectively. The intuitive approach is to examine each category carefully and then determine the total school tension index fromone (1) to ten (10). Before the monitor can do this, however, some kind of meaning must be attached to the numbers from one to ten, as reflected in the categories. If this is not done, to say that a school had a tension index of "three" would not mean very much. Therefore, the tension index scale from one to ten is coded as follows:

(1) One means no tension at all - school is closed.

(2) Two means that school is in session - no problems at all - unrealistic.

(3) Three means that on a given day, there will be the usual complaining, a few isolated fights no racial overtones (one-to-one_, several truancies and some tardiness.

(4) Four means that there will be some minor student-teacher verbal confrontations, several fights - black and white with racial overtones.

(5) Five means that there will be a few negative rumors, more fights, and the overall appearance of the cafeteria has become very untidy.

(6) Six means that the cafeteria behavior is unusually loud, there are distracting incidents, i.e. throwing milk cartons, food, etc., tardiness to class in numbers is increasing.

(7) Seven means that suspensions are increasing, students are beginning to walk the halls in groups, more negative student-teacher confrontations.

(8) Eight means that increasing student-teacher conflicts (physical) are beginning to become widely circulated, unprovoked assults (one-to-one), school dress is becoming worse (wearing fighting clothes)

(9) Nine means that groups are roaming the halls (blacks and whites), gang confrontations, teacher assaults, property damage.

(10) Ten means large scale overt fighting, bloodshed, police called in with dogs, school is closed.

The next step is to determine the total tension index level. Theoretically, when the tension index is five or below the school is operating within safe limits. Whenever the tension goes beyond five the school is beginning to enter a high risk index level, as reflected in the recorded observations of each category. At this point, school is experiencing more fights, there are beginning to be more suspensions, tardiness in increasing, etc.

The <u>objective method</u> is another alternative of monitoring the tension in an educational setting. This is accomplished simply by recording the total number of incidents in each category on the chart, i.e., number of fights,

suspensions, rumors, tardiness, teacher-student confrontations, community incidents, etc. The cafeteria appearance would have to be more specifically defined to mean the numberof tables untidy; behavior in the halls would have to be restricted to mean the number of pushing incidents; classroom boredom could be determined by asking a sample of students, "How are things in class?" Once numbers are totaled for each category, all of them are added together then divided by the total number of categories. The arithmetic mean that is obtained is the total tension index level, and therefore, reflects the overall emotional climate of the building.

Both methods have certain advantages and disadvantages. The intuitive approach is comprehensive in nature because it examines more information in each category. The objective method is more narrow and reflects a decion that is more statistically accurate but does not include the breadth of the intuitive approach. The Kankakee School System used the intuitive technique because experienced personnel did the monitoring. These persons, because of their experience, appeared to have had a "feel" of the total educational environment of students.

Once the tension has been determined, it should be recorded for that week on a chart in the monitor's office. The vertical axis of the graph should indicate the tension from one to ten and the horizontal axis should reflect the weeks of each month. The tension is thus plotted and the data collected can provide valuable information for future decisions.

For administrators to know that the tension is rising, regardless to which process utilized, only part of the solution. Ways and means of gradually reducing the tension is the next important step.

Graduated Reduction in Tension

As the building principal observes the total tension and a pattern begins to indicate that it is rising, he should have a strategy already developed to

reduce the tension. This approach could be accomplished in several different ways by resorting to the single category technique or the general approach.

The Single Category Technique. If one of the categories is responsible for the tension by depicting an unusually high tension factor he could have activities to reduce the tension only in that particular category. If the chart indicates that student-teacher conflicts are increasing, he should meet with his staff and discuss the problem, or meet with key students and teachers for rap sessions that could be instrumental in resolving mounting student-teacher confrontations.

The General Approach. The general approach to tension reduction intervention is based on activities introduced in the total school, from minimum to maximum efforts. In implementing the general approach, the school administration should be on guard not to saturate the student body with activities of tension reduction that will reduce the tension so low that it will negatively affect the academic attitudes of students to such an extent that they become more interested in the activities than about learning. When this happens, a large number of students will receive failing grades because their school work will undoubtedly suffer.

Based on experience, if activities are to be effective they must be done on school time. This might present some problems with the building staff if they are not aware of the administrator's overall intentions. The purpose of activities is to create positive excitement when students are tense, thus systematically reciprocating the tension. If the activities are implemented after school, then they are the least effective means of improving the emotional atmosphere.

The general approach to tension reduction is concerned with the total tension picture, and the following activities are listed from minimum impact on tension to more extensive efforts to bring the tension within safe limits; parental visitation team to lunch; visitation of the honorary school chaplain, more class projects, rapping with student leaders, music in cafeteria, rapping with parents, clean-up campaigns, student and teacher talent shows, gospel choir performances,

cultural assemblies, spring festival and school dances. What the administrator should remember is that the key to this whole process in tension reduction is timing. If an activity is held at a time when the tension is already within safe limits, it will have very little positive effect on the total school environment.

Parental visiting team to lunch. The principal should have a list of key parents to invite as guests for lunch at the various lunch periods. These parents should sit at different tables in the cafeteria and engage students in general conversation about the school.

Honorary school chaplain. At the beginning of the school year, the high school should elect an honorary chaplain. His basic function would be to visit the school when the tension was mounting, talk with the students in the halls, have lunch with them; also, he should visit the various activities and athletic contests as their guest.

Class projects and field trips. When students begin to get bored with school, the principal should meet with his staff and encourage them to engage the students in more subject matter related projects. These classroom activities should get students involved physically in educational activities that will direct their attention to positive thoughts. This could be a very important aspect of the tension reduction process.

Music during lunch. There is an old expression which states that music calms the savage beast. It also works well in keeping down noise in the cafeteria. The record player should be operated by a student, the students should bring the records that they want played and the music appeal selection should alternate so as to accommodate a variety of interest and cultures. Again, this function should be moderately supervised, by one of the school's administrators.

Rapping with teachers. As indicated earlier, if the data indicates that there are regular, constant numbers of student-teacher confrontations, then it is encumbered upon the principal to institute a dialogue between himself and his staff in

resolving the difficulty. Problems of this magnitude which go unattended could have repercussions which will negatively affect the school environment.

Rapping with student leaders. If the principal is on task, he should have no difficulty in making a distinction between the real leaders and elected leaders. Often times the real leaders are not elected to important school offices. Once the leaders have been selected, with the group representing a 50-50 black white ratio, the principal should call them together to talk. Certain ground rules should be established early in terms of confidence, respect for each person in the group, give and take, etc. These sessions should be significant in opening lines of communications across various problems of socio-economic differences and racial hang-ups.

Rapping with parents. Key parents, both black and white, should be invited into the school after hours, to rap about their assumptions concerning the educational process in the school. These people, who are also tension movers, could be very important allies in working with students in the community which could have a positive effect on the school climate. The same ground rules should apply for parents as for students.

Clean-up campaigns. When the tension begins to escalate, the halls, the cafeteria, and the campus in general gets dirty. Where there are study halls, students should be asked to clean up the school. In the process they work off a lot of energy in a positive manner. Also, some teachers might be willing to release key student leaders who also may want to participate in the activity. As the appearance improves, somehow or other, the emotional climate improves also.

Student and teacher talent shows. Basically, if the student talent show is to be effective, it should be designed, arranged, rehearsed, performed, and concluded by students, with the help of someone on the staff. These shows if well done, can be a very positive force in reducing the anxiety of students. Rehearsals should be on school time, as well as the performances.

Teacher talent shows are also very positive and helpful, but are more

difficult to execute. These shows should have an arranger whose task it is to coordinate the various performances. A wide range of participation should be expected and the coordinator needs to really encourage the teachers to get involved.

The gospel choir. Many students are able to do an excellent job of singing gospel songs. They need to be organized and someone, parent or staff member, should assist them with rehearsals, arrangements, etc. so they can perform for assembly programs. These students, who are usually Black, can find a great deal of success in this area of entertainment and should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their talents.

Cultural assemblies. Professional groups which comprise both Black and white ethnic groups should be brought into the school to perform for the total school body. These assembly programs serve basically two functions. Naturally they entertain the students and are also educational at the same time. More importantly, the professionals have a way of completely removing the students from their problems and in the process relax their minds and thoughts.

Spring festivals. On this particular day, school would, for all practical purposes be out. Attendance would be taken, and students would then be free to participate in the various activities of the day. Activities might include dancing, movies in the auditorium, jazz sessions, baseball, frizbee contests, softball, basketball, ping pong, beating up old cars, slave auctions, etc. This activity is not recommeded unless the tension was near a riotous stage.

School dance. This is an activity that I would not recommend on school time. The planning for it, however, could be done by student leaders during the day, with the principal's approval. Tickets should be sold for this dance by students so that a quality band could be acquired so that the students will enjoy themselves.

Conclusion

The systematic method of tension monitoring and graduated tension reduction discussed here is comprehensive in scope and examines school strife in terms of

many different variables. This total approach seems to have advantages in that decisions to leave school open or to close schools do not depend on a particular rumor incident. In other words, a rumor or incident is analyzed in relationship to other components before action is taken. In the past, students have become very skillful in the "tension game" by deliberately implementing a particular act that they know would upset administrators, then calmly sit back and observe the manner in which administrators get uptight, and unconsciously do things that actually make the situation worse.

The implementation of this program does not necessarily involve a great deal of money. The personnel schools already have could be utilized without any additional burdens. Some of the tension reduction activities could cost small sums, but could also be substituted with other projects that are less expensive.

This approach to maintaining a peaceful school environment is not based on a crisis intervention-prevention plan. It seeks to engage components of the school, at times when things are so smooth that one could easily find this process difficult to maintain. However, if PROJECT GRIT is implemented, over a period of years there will be no need for it because the more long term strategies would have had an opportunity to operate at removing the etiology of the problem.

In closing, tension monitoring and tension reduction rgives an administrator the opportunity to buy time", to "put his finger in the dike," so that more systematic organizational and operational undergirding can become a reality. It is the author's opinion that long-term changes are absolutely necessary to produce educational peace but this effort needs a period of "calm" for changes to devebp in the institutional, in the instructional and in the personal interaction processes.